

Gardening, Yard Decoration, and Agriculture Among Peoples of African Descent in the Rural South and in the Cayman Islands

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In this paper, I pose two questions concerning African American cultural landscapes. The first is one of origin. Does the use of ornamental plants around dwellings have African antecedents? I have found none, although the use of flowers and other ornamental plants by African Americans in the United States and in the Caribbean has evolved very distinctive characteristics. The second question concerns the survival of African farming practices. Why are African methods of farming practiced in some areas of the Americas but not others? In the Cayman Islands for instance, I found slash and burn agriculture that appeared to be little changed from traditional farming practices in West Africa.(1)

First, a few caveats. I interpret “American Landscape” as landscapes of the Americas, North, Central, South, and the Caribbean. Therefore I include as African Americans, people of African descent in all the Americas as well as the United States. Second, most of my work has been in rural areas. African American society until quite recently had been predominately rural throughout the Americas. My work in the United States has focused on the rural piedmont in Georgia, Alabama, and the low country of South Carolina. Thirdly, my first hand knowledge of the Caribbean is limited to the Cayman Islands and the Lesser Antilles. My knowledge of agricultural practices and gardening on other Caribbean Islands is mostly derived from Lydia Pulsipher’s work.(2) Fourthly, my knowledge of African cultures is rather superficial.

A striking feature of the yards of people of African descent in the Americas is that they are often highly decorated with both plants and other ornaments. When working on my book, *African American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*, I searched of many of the earliest photographic collections from West Africa in the Commonwealth Office Library in London. But I found no examples of the use of plants for ornament. Nor did I find reference to plants being grown for ornament in the descriptions of early travelers in West Africa.

Shade trees were frequent, but I concluded that the use of plants for decoration was not common in Africa and, in the Americas, had resulted from acculturation during colonialization and slavery. Yet I felt that I might be “denying rather than investigating” Africanisms as Melville Herskovits suggested researchers had been inclined to do in the past. However, the publication in 1993, of Jack Goody’s *The Culture of Flowers*, reassured me that I was not alone in my conclusion. The title of the first chapter of Goody’s book poses the question, “No flowers in Africa?” He described his observations in West Africa thus:

I had attended many ceremonies and had seen food, the raw and the cooked, offered at innumerable shrines—but never flowers...Islam certainly has its culture of flowers, at least in Asia, the Mediterranean, and to some extent in East Africa.(3)

However, although there may have been no ornamental plants grown in African yards, the spaces around dwellings were kept bare by hoeing and sweeping them regularly, and this practice was adopted in the Americas. The “swept yard” became a feature that was once ubiquitous at all levels of society in the Southern United States, and in the islands of the Caribbean. The sweeping was done

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not only to keep the yard tidy, but the pattern and texture of the sandy surface became very important.

In the Cayman Islands, the “sand yard” has become highly stylized with meticulously raked sand between the plants. The routine involved also became a ritual on the Islands. On a moonlit night shortly before Christmas, the whole family would go down to the beach where they would collect sand in large baskets that were normally used for carrying produce (locally known as “backing”) from provision grounds to the home.(4) The sand would be piled in the yard, spread, and then carefully raked smooth. Alan Ebanks described it to me.

It was a family occasion to get together and back sand. The moonlight made it easy to see.... If you've ever seen clean, fresh sand spread in the moonlight, you realize how beautiful it is. It's very much prettier than in the day and in the sun.

Yards are swept with brooms that are made of an appropriate local plant material. In the Cayman Islands, branches of a shrub, known locally as rosemary (*Croton linearis*), are bound together to make yard brooms. House brooms are made of thatch palm (*Coccothrinax proctorii*). In the southern Piedmont region of the United States, dogwood (*Cornus florida*) is almost always used for yard brooms, but gallberry (*Ilex coriacea*), or dog fennel (*Eupatorium capillifolium*) is more commonly used in coastal areas. In the southern United States, memories of sweeping the yard are still vivid in the minds of many older people, both black and white.

Although the plants are different, their arrangement in yards in the South was strikingly similar to the arrangement of plants in the yards in the Cayman Islands. Plants are spaced individually

and are appreciated as individuals. Very rarely are they grouped or massed and are generally are not used for purposes such as ground cover, as an edging, or to provide a screen. They are not used as “structural” elements in the composition, to enclose a lawn, to provide a background, or to screen the foundations of a building. Probably for this reason, evergreen shrubs, grown mostly for their foliage, are not common in African American yards in the South. Nor is it usual to group several of the same plant together. Rather, they are set apart from adjacent plants so that they can be clearly distinguished.

Color is the most important criterion for choosing plants. In the tropics, there are many highly colored foliage plants, the croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), in all its variations, being the most popular. Among the flowers, old favorites such as hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* and *H. schizopetalus*), oleander (*Nerium oleander*), and bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea spectabilis*) are all spectacularly colorful. In more temperate areas however, there are few hardy colorful foliage plants, and flowers predominate. But I discovered no recurring patterns in the use of colors. I found no cases of deliberately arranging colors to clash, as has been noted by Robert Farris Thompson in African American quilt design. He wrote “Black quilters usually enliven cloth with what might be called ‘attack coloration’ (i.e. even outpouring of high decibel, often clashing hues).”(5)

In my research in the southern states of the United States, I found little evidence of agricultural practices that could be attributed to Africa. Littlefield has argued convincingly that plantation owners on the South Carolina coast sought out slaves with expertise in growing rice, but the multicropping systems typical of much of equatorial West Africa appears to have had no equivalents in the United

States. Recently, I was studying subsistence agricultural practices and gardening traditions on the Cayman Islands.(6) I was astonished to find not only complex multicropping, but also slash and burn land rotation typical of West Africa. The Cayman Islands were not inhabited when the British first colonized the islands and it is doubtful if Amerindian practices had any influence on agriculture on the islands.

The rotation takes place, in the instance described here, over a seven-year period.(7) The land is first cleared and burned. The slash is piled more thickly on tree stumps to increase the effectiveness of the burn. The soil is then cultivated with a hoe or a machete. Several crops were planted in a typically complex arrangement, with pumpkins, sweet potatoes, yams, cassava, plantains, papaya, and even mango trees, although from appearances they were probably survivors of an earlier rotation. After about five years, productivity will have fallen, and an area is fenced in preparation for conversion to a grass pasture, known locally as a grass “piece.” Pasturing livestock on the plot can restore the fertility in a much shorter period than a forest rotation. Animals were not used in slash and burn rotations in equatorial Africa and, in the Cayman Islands, probably resulted from European influence.

Multi-cropping has distinct advantages in wet tropical climates for subsistence farming. There are no seasons, and crops can be harvested as-and-when needed. Consequently, land is not exposed to erosion and leaching for much of the year, as it is in seasonal seed agriculture. Harvesting as-needed also eliminates the problem of storage. The complex of plant types, annual and perennial herbaceous plants, root crops, vines, shrubs, and trees gives excellent soil protection and uses sunlight most

efficiently. Multicropping is not suited to producing large surpluses of produce for sale, an important goal of plantation agriculture. But, as subsistence was the goal of most Caymanians (cash crops were palm rope and turtles), there was no great pressure for change. However, in the United States, perennial multicropping is impractical due to the seasonal climate. Many slaves were not permitted to have their own gardens, and for those that were, there was strong pressure to adopt the practices of the plantation.

The soil on the Caymans is so rocky that row cropping and mechanical cultivation are impossible. As a result, a plantation agricultural economy never developed as it did on most other Caribbean islands. Slaves were brought, mostly from Jamaica, to cut the mahogany, which covered much of the interior of the islands. But after all the mahogany had been cut, most slaves were returned to Jamaica. Very few Africans were brought to the Caymans as field hands. They were brought as house slaves, to work on the wharves, and in shipbuilding. These slaves would have acquired a much wider range of skills than field hands.

When slavery on the Caymans was ended in 1835, there were considerable areas in the interior of the islands that were not used or occupied. Although most of the land had actually been granted to individuals in large tracts between 1734 and 1742, the valuable timber has been cut. The land was of little value to its owners, and it was not difficult for ex-slaves to find land to cultivate and occupy without being evicted. Thus, a measure of independence and even land proprietorship came much earlier to the Cayman Islanders than to Africans on other Caribbean islands or in the Southern United States. The catalog of the Jamaican Exhibition of 1891

noted that the Caymans were remarkable for peasant ownership of the land.⁽⁸⁾

Most Cayman Islanders used to live close to the sea, just behind the dunes, and their provision grounds were in the interior of the islands. The house was a thatched, frame structure of ironwood (*Chionanthus caymanensis*), protected by dense thickets of sea grape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), sea almond (*Terminalia catappa*), Australian pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*), and coconuts (*Cocos nucifera*). In sheltered areas, adjacent to the house, islanders grew a wide range of different fruits including avocados (*Persea americana*), akee (*Blighia sapida*), breadfruit (*Artocarpus atilis*), various citrus fruits (*Citrus spp.*), soursop (*Annona muricata*), sweetsop (*Annona squamosa*), star fruit or carambola (*Averrhoa carambola*), and naseberry (*Manilkara zapota*). Some fruits such as plantains (*Musa paradisiaca*) and papaya (*Carica papaya*) were too sensitive to the salt spray and tended to be grown on the provision grounds well away from the shore. These provision grounds were sometimes quite distant from the dwelling and often a hut would be built to allow the owner to stay overnight.

Pulsipher noted that on the island of Montserrat, slaves cultivated provision grounds far from the plantations, but this had to be done surreptitiously for fear of the plantation owner finding out. In contrast, Cayman Islanders had ready access to land both for agriculture and fruit growing. They were not subject to pressures to adopt methods of row-crop agriculture, and traditional multicropping slash and burn techniques were more adaptable to local soil conditions.

Notes

1. In this paper, I use the term "garden" to refer only to the place where vegetables are grown. The "yard" includes other places around the dwelling including those used for pleasure and ornament.
2. Lydia M. Pulsipher, "They Have Saturdays and Sundays to Feed Themselves: Slave Gardens in the Caribbean," Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1898; reprint, in *Expedition* 2(2)(1990): 24-33.
3. Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11.
4. Provision grounds are plots of land, usually in the interior of the islands and often distant from the home where produce is grown.
5. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 13.
6. Richard Westmacott, *Gardens, Yards, Pieces, and Grounds: The Domestic Places and Spaces of Caymanians* (George Town: National Museum of the Cayman Islands, 1999).
7. The area Hutland, Grand Cayman, was named for the huts that were built on the provision grounds that were often so distant from homes that the owners built places to stay overnight.
8. Neville Williams, *A History of the Cayman Islands* (Grand Cayman: The Government of the Cayman Islands, 1970), 65.

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